

Rabies Fact Sheet



What is rabies?

Rabies is a rare but serious disease of the brain caused by the rabies virus. Once people and animals are infected with the rabies virus, they almost always die. Each year, about 200 mostly wild animals in California and about 6,000 animals nationwide are diagnosed with rabies. Rabies infects very few humans in the United States and California: since 1980, rabies has been reported in 15 California residents.

How do people and animals get rabies?

People and animals can get rabies if an animal with rabies bites them, or if saliva from an animal with rabies gets into a break in their skin or into their eyes, nose, or mouth. You cannot get rabies just by touching or being near an animal with rabies. Scratches are rarely, if ever, a concern for rabies transmission. If you are concerned about a wound from an animal and are not sure if it is a bite or a scratch, consult with a healthcare provider.

Which animals can get rabies?

All mammals, including humans, are susceptible to infection with the rabies virus. In California, bats and skunks are the animals that most frequently get rabies. Rabies is sometimes found in other wild animals such as coyotes, foxes, and raccoons. Domestic animals such as dogs, cats, horses, and cattle can also get rabies, but this is not as common. Birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish cannot get rabies.

What are the common signs of rabies in an animal?

An animal with rabies will not behave normally. Strange or unnatural behavior in an animal that has rabies can include:

- A wild animal that seems unusually tame or isn't afraid to approach people
- An animal out during the day that is usually active only at night, such as a skunk, fox, or bat
- A dog or cat that has trouble walking, eating, or drinking, or has a change in personality or how they act
- A normally calm animal that acts in an agitated or aggressive manner
- A bat that can't fly or has been caught by a dog or cat

What are the symptoms of rabies in humans?

Rabies is a very serious disease and is almost always fatal if not treated **before** symptoms start. Once the first symptoms of rabies appear, it's usually too late to start treatment and the patient will likely die.

Symptoms of rabies appear once the virus has reached a person's brain. The first symptoms usually begin about 4–8 weeks after exposure to the virus and consist of a tingling or itching feeling at the bite site. Symptoms get worse over the following days and often include difficulty walking, speaking, or swallowing, and confusion, distress, and loss of consciousness. Nearly all people infected with rabies will go into a coma and die 1–2 weeks after the start of symptoms.

Rabies Prevention

How can vaccination protect pets and people from rabies?

Because there is no treatment for rabies, it is very important to prevent rabies in the first place. Rabies can be prevented in both humans and animals through vaccination against the rabies virus. Rabies vaccination can be administered in pre-exposure and post-exposure situations, meaning before or after exposure to the rabies virus.

Vaccination In Pets

[Rabies vaccination for pets](#) is key to protecting pet owners from rabies. A pet that is up-to-date on its rabies vaccination is unlikely to get rabies if it encounters an animal with rabies. Rabies vaccination protects pets from rabies, but also provides an important second level of defense against transmitting rabies to pet owners.

[State of California regulation](#) requires dogs over 4 months of age in California to be vaccinated for rabies. There is no statewide requirement for cats to be vaccinated for rabies, but some cities and counties require cats to be vaccinated or licensed. The [American Animal Hospital Association](#), [American Association of Feline Practitioners](#), [American Veterinary Medical Association](#), and the [National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians](#) recommend that **all** cats be vaccinated for rabies. Vaccination is recommended even for indoor cats, as they may encounter wildlife if they escape from the house or if a wild animal, such as a rabid bat, enters the house.

Vaccinating pets against rabies after they are exposed is not reliably effective at preventing illness and death. The best way to prevent rabies in pets is through vaccination at the earliest possible age and scheduling routine booster doses.

Vaccination In Humans

Pre-exposure rabies vaccination is recommended for people employed in certain occupations with elevated risk of exposure to rabies, including those who work directly with animals that could have rabies, or those who travel to parts of the world where rabies is common. Because the risk of rabies to most people in the U.S. is low, pre-exposure vaccination against rabies is not recommended for all people.

Rabies vaccination given after an animal bite can prevent the rabies virus from causing illness and death. Rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) should be started as soon as possible following a bite from an animal that is likely to have rabies. Decisions on rabies PEP are made between a patient and the health care provider, following an assessment of the exposure incident and consultation with public health officials. For more information about PEP, visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) Rabies PEP webpage](#).

How can I prevent bites from unfamiliar animals?

The best way to prevent rabies is to avoid and prevent bites from wild or unfamiliar animals. To prevent animal bites:

- Leave all wild animals alone. Do not approach, touch, or try to feed any animals that you do not know.
- Never adopt or bring wild animals into your home. Contact a [wildlife rehabilitation facility](#) if you are concerned that a wild animal needs care.
- Remove food that attracts wild animals by keeping garbage in closed, secure containers, and do not leave pet food outside overnight.
- Seal holes or gaps in your home where bats and other animals could enter.
- Take extra care to avoid animals when [travelling outside the U.S.](#), especially dogs in developing countries, [as rabies in dogs is common in some countries](#).
- Keep pet cats indoors as much as possible. This keeps them safe from contact with wildlife that might have rabies and other infectious diseases.
- If you take your pets off your property, keep them on a leash and under your control at all times.

What should I do if a wild animal bites me?

If you are bitten by a wild animal, you should immediately wash the wound with soap and running water and seek medical care from a doctor or healthcare provider. Rabies is 100% preventable if you seek medical care right away after an animal bite. A doctor will decide if the wound requires medical attention and if you need treatment to prevent rabies. When you talk to a doctor, be sure to provide as much detail as you can about the event, including:

- Date and time of the bite
- Where you were when the bite occurred
- Description of the animal that bit you
- What you were doing right before you were bitten

If your doctor decides that you could have been exposed to rabies, your doctor may recommend that you receive a series of rabies vaccinations (PEP) which will prevent rabies symptoms.

Report the bite to your local animal control agency. If the animal is not contained, animal control officers may be able to locate and test the wild animal for rabies. If the wild animal is in your house, animal control can remove the animal. Do not grab or try to capture the animal yourself. If the animal is a bat, carefully follow [instructions on how to safely secure a bat](#) until it can be collected by animal control.

What should I do if a wild animal bites my pet?

If a wild animal bites your pet, do not try to get between your pet and a wild animal if they are engaged in a fight. If your pet is badly hurt, take it to a veterinarian right away. Otherwise, consult with your veterinarian whether a pet that was bitten by wildlife should receive medical care. Report the bite to your local animal control agency who can attempt to capture the wild animal for rabies testing. If the wild animal is not available for testing, animal control will determine the best options for your pet based on its vaccination history.

What if a dog bites me or my pet?

The risk of rabies from domestic dogs in California is low because most dogs are vaccinated against rabies by state law. Report the bite and any information you have on the biting dog to your local animal control agency. They will assess the dog's health and verify that it has been vaccinated against rabies. Discuss with your health care provider or veterinarian the need for medical care for injuries to you or your pet.

Where can I get more information about rabies?

- [California Department of Public Health Rabies webpage](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Rabies.aspx)
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- [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Rabies webpage](https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/)
(<https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>)
- [Your local health department](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Pages/LocalHealthServicesAndOffices.aspx)
(<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Pages/LocalHealthServicesAndOffices.aspx>)

Updated June 2022